From Multilateralism to Transactioal Peace: How TRIPP is Redefining the South Caucasus

Two interconnected events took place in the South Caucasus at the end of the summer. One was the U.S.-brokered agreement establishing the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), and the other was the official dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group. The first received considerable attention while the second went largely unnoticed. That contrast is revealing.

The Minsk Group, in place since 1992, had come to symbolize the failures of post-Cold War multilateral peacebuilding. Few mourned its demise. TRIPP, by contrast, appears to signal a new era of transactional deal-making: rapid, interest-driven interventions led by the most powerful actor and designed to deliver quick results. The recent release of hostages and the ceasefire in Gaza offer another example of such fast-paced, personalized diplomacy achieving a breakthrough after years of drawn-out negotiations repeatedly derailed by violence.

The two conflicts are very different, yet they share one characteristic: both have become part of their regions' political landscapes — entrenched, cyclical, and seemingly insoluble. Time will tell whether or not these new peace initiatives will endure. What is certain is that the traditional approaches to conflict resolution have reached their limits. The question now is what this shift means for legacy multilateralism in the South Caucasus and how it will shape the region's emerging order.

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The Rise and Fall of the OSCE Minsk Group

On 1 September, the OSCE's 57 participating states unanimously voted to dissolve the organization's longest-running conflict-resolution mechanism. The Minsk Group, established in 1992 to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, had three rotating co-chairs — Russia, France, and the United States — alongside several participating states, including Belarus, Finland, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Türkiye. Its mandate was threefold: to end hostilities, negotiate a lasting political settlement, and sustain peace through an OSCE presence on the ground.

Over the course of more than three decades, none of these objectives has been achieved. From the outset, the Minsk process was marred by mistrust, allegations of bias, and an absence of meaningful progress. By the time the second Karabakh war broke out in 2020, the group had been completely sidelined as Russia unilaterally brokered a ceasefire with Türkiye's involvement, marking Ankara's entry as a regional actor with growing ambitions. Its formal dissolution merely confirmed what had long been apparent — that the process had lost both relevance and credibility. More strikingly, it epitomized what Laurence Broers called "sweeping aside of multilateral diplomacy represented by the Minsk Group by multipolar power dynamics."

Azerbaijan had long accused all three co-chairs of favoring Armenia, citing the influence of Armenian diasporas in France and the United States, as well as Russia's role as Armenia's main security guarantor. Baku also believed that the Minsk process rewarded Armenia's intransigence and tacitly accepted the long-standing violation of its territorial integrity. It was, therefore, unsurprising that Baku made its participation in peace talks conditional on the Minsk Group's termination. Armenia, too, had expressed growing frustration. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan called the OSCE mechanism one that had "never done anything useful" and only deepened the conflict instead of resolving it. In a rare moment of alignment, the two leaders jointly urged the OSCE to wind down the group. The organization is now finalizing the process, expected to conclude by year-end — a quiet end to what was once envisioned as a model of consensus-based multilateral peacebuilding and a reminder of how far global conflict mediation has shifted toward more ad hoc, power-driven diplomacy.

There were many reasons for the Minsk process's failure. Its institutional design, built on the principle of consensus, allowed the parties to block progress at every stage. More consequentially, it enabled Russia to instrumentalize the process — positioning itself as a "legitimate" mediator while ensuring that no lasting settlement emerged. In doing so, the OSCE inadvertently helped Moscow pursue its long-standing policy of using unresolved conflicts as tools of leverage and control under the cover of international legitimacy and deniability.

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While the Minsk Group consistently upheld international norms, it ultimately entrenched normative ambiguity, oscillating between the principles of territorial integrity and national self-determination rather than devising a framework to reconcile them. As tangible results proved elusive, the process drifted into a cycle of performative rather than substantive diplomacy — meetings, communiqués, and missions that sustained the appearance of engagement but not its substance.

Ultimately, the OSCE Minsk Group was a product of its time. It reflected the optimism of the post-Cold War moment — the belief that rules-based, consensual engagement could manage conflicts without producing winners or losers. The consensus principle meant that the organization could only be as effective and strong as its participating states wanted and allowed it to be. Moreover, the Minsk Group's approach mirrored the broader purpose of the OSCE itself: to build bridges with Russia and integrate it into a shared European security architecture. Underpinning this was the assumption that Moscow could act as a stabilizing force in its neighborhood.

For the newly independent states that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union, this framework offered both opportunities and constraints. Weakened by internal turmoil and dependent on international support, they became participants in, but rarely shapers of, the multilateral order imposed upon them. The Minsk Group thus captured both the promise and the illusion of the post-Cold War settlement — cooperation with Russia as the foundation of stability and a process that froze the conflict without delivering a lasting peace.

TRIPP – A New Model of Conflict Settlement?

After years of military build-up and deepening frustration with the stagnant Minsk process, Azerbaijan launched a decisive military offensive in 2023, reclaiming Nagorno-Karabakh by force. The operation marked a turning point — a move towards the forcible rather than negotiated "resolution" of conflicts in Russia's near abroad. Moscow, absorbed by its war in Ukraine and increasingly dependent on regional actors such as Türkiye, chose not to intervene. Armenia, left isolated, accepted defeat but grew alarmed that its territorial integrity could be next in question as Baku pressed for a land corridor linking Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave through Armenia's Syunik province.

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The so-called Zangezur corridor has become the main obstacle to peace and the broader normalization between Armenia and Türkiye. Yerevan refused to accept an extraterritorial route outside its sovereign control, yet feared that Azerbaijan might again resort to force. It was amid this deadlock that President Donald Trump unexpectedly intervened, proposing the Trump Route for Peace and Prosperity — a commercial passage managed by a U.S. company under a 99-year lease. Described as "Washington's biggest forays in the post-Soviet space," TRIPP bypassed years of diplomatic stalemate by reframing the conflict as an investment opportunity rather than a sovereignty dispute. The approach it embodies is transactional, personality-driven, and anchored in American economic power rather than multilateral consensus.

TRIPP offered sufficient political rewards to all sides to satisfy core interests and encourage a retreat from maximalist positions, paving the way to the peace agreement with the potential to reshape the region. For Azerbaijan, the deal delivered both strategic and diplomatic gains: access to the Nakhchivan exclave, guaranteed transit rights, and reduced dependence on Iran, previously its only land link. President Ilham Aliyev emerged as one of the principal beneficiaries — securing a direct line to President Trump and reinforcing Baku's position as the dominant regional power in the South

Caucasus and an increasingly relevant actor in the Middle East. Reports suggest that Azerbaijan may take part in the proposed stabilization force in Gaza, building on its earlier role in facilitating dialogue between various regional actors, including Türkiye and Israel. Moreover, absent from the discussion has been any reference to Azerbaijan's abysmal human rights record or conditions tied to the release of political prisoners. Aliyev's rule thus remains not only unchallenged but legitimized internationally by his military and diplomatic success.

Armenia, negotiating from a position of weakness, also secured significant political, economic, and security assurances. The TRIPP agreement offered an explicit endorsement of Armenian sovereignty and territorial integrity, prompting Baku to recognize Armenia's current borders and renounce the threat of force. For Yerevan, the provisions on mutual security and confidence-building measures, as well as the physical presence of a U.S. commercial entity on Armenian territory, function as a quasi-security guarantee. The deal also ends Armenia's long-standing isolation from regional trade and connectivity initiatives, opening access to routes and markets that had long been closed. Equally important, it reduces Armenia's strategic dependence on Russia and creates the conditions for normalizing relations with Türkiye. This step could bring substantial economic dividends and signal a broader realignment of the region's geopolitical balance.

Türkiye was among the tacit supporters of the TRIPP agreement and stands to gain considerably from it, both in consolidating its regional influence and advancing its broader geopolitical agenda. Ankara has been interested in normalizing relations with Yerevan but recognized that only the weight of U.S. backing — and President Trump's political capital — could bring Armenia and Azerbaijan to a mutually beneficial agreement. At the same time, the success of the deal depends heavily on Türkiye's cooperation, drawing Washington and Ankara into closer alignment, at least in the South Caucasus. Indirectly, TRIPP and the prospect of Armenian-Turkish normalization could also ease tensions between Ankara and Paris. Commercially, Türkiye stands to benefit from the diversification of transit routes across the South Caucasus as demand for the Middle Corridor grows. The arrangement also sidelines Iran, diminishing Tehran's leverage over Azerbaijan and giving Türkiye a clear advantage in their long-running competition for regional influence.

The TRIPP agreement stands as perhaps the most striking sign of Russia's waning hegemony in its former sphere of influence. Unlike the Minsk process, Moscow is entirely absent from the arrangement — no mention of its "special interests," no residual mediating role, and no diplomatic courtesy acknowledging its authority in the region. For decades, such exclusion seemed unthinkable. That both Armenia and Azerbaijan endorsed it — and that Washington provided the platform for them to act upon it — marks a profound geopolitical shift. As Thomas de Waal observed: "If you are going to break pledges you made to President Vladimir Putin, the Oval Office is a good place to do it."

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This leaves Russia with two options: it can either act as a spoiler, using its economic leverage in Armenia and mobilizing domestic opposition to destabilize Prime Minister Pashinyan, or it can attempt to profit indirectly from TRIPP through its control of Armenian railways and other strategic assets. Its muted response, especially compared with Iran's vocal criticism, suggests that Moscow

is biding its time — weighing how developments in Ukraine and its relationship with Washington may shape its next move. Yet, whatever course it takes, Russia's exclusion from the South Caucasus' most consequential peace initiative in decades symbolizes the erosion of its regional authority — a loss of influence that now arguably extends beyond the Caucasus.

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The only country that defies this trend is Georgia. In contrast to its neighbors, which have distanced themselves from Russia, Georgia has pursued a policy of political rapprochement and has deepened its economic dependence on Moscow. This strategic alignment goes beyond rhetorical convergence. Tbilisi is not merely echoing Kremlin talking points about the 'global war party' and a 'decadent Europe' allegedly plotting regime change in Georgia to drag it into war; it has reportedly become one of the key links in the so-called 'roundabout trade,' allowing Russia to circumvent sanctions and sustain its war effort. As the EU and the U.S. have been tightening sanctions against Russian oil and gas producers, Rosneft has just supplied its first oil cargo to the newly built Kulevi refinery on Georgia's Black Sea coast. According to TASS, the trade turnover between Russia and Georgia reached nearly USD 3.1 billion in the first six months of 2025. This is a 7% increase as compared to the same period last year. Benefiting from the influx of Russian capital and loopholes in the sanctions regime, Georgia's ruling elite is shifting from passively refusing to join sanctions to becoming both a strategic facilitator and a beneficiary of Russia's sanctions-evasion network.

There is a risk that TRIPP will further contribute to Georgia's growing isolation by depriving it of its monopolistic position over regional transit routes. Georgia's transit advantage has long depended on Armenia's isolation and the continued hostility between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Removing that condition erodes Georgia's unique role and may limit its potential as a transit and connectivity hub. The country could benefit from broader regional stabilization if Tbilisi were involved in these new processes rather than remaining an increasingly isolated bystander. Russia is likely to capitalize on this dynamic, offering deeper trade and economic ties to ensure that the ruling Georgian Dream party remains in power. From Moscow's perspective, the Georgian Dream must retain control as Georgia provides Russia with its last foothold in the region — one that could yet serve as a platform for a future comeback.

TRIPP vs Minsk: Twilight of Legacy Multilateralism

The contrast between the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group and the emergence of TRIPP captures a profound shift in how conflicts may be managed and transformed. Instead of pursuing peace through protracted negotiations within a multilateral framework, transactional arrangements such as TRIPP engage the interests of key players to deliver immediate political gains. The main innovation of TRIPP is that it turned a geopolitical impasse into a commercial project. The Minsk Group once symbolized the belief that peace could be built through norms, institutions and compromise; TRIPP embodies a new logic of power and reward.

Whether or not this model can deliver lasting stability or merely entrench new dependencies remains to be seen. The absence of institutional backing and the lack of defined enforcement mechanisms could become major obstacles to the implementation of the agreement. As Rich-

ard Gowan of the International Crisis Group has observed: "Peace agreements are not self-executing." This was one of the key advantages of involving international organizations such as the OSCE, which provided not only mechanisms for oversight but also the capacity to support fragile transitions through on-the-ground presence and diplomatic backing from headquarters.

Multilateral engagement also offered a degree of protection for the rights of populations in conflict-affected areas, reducing the risk of ethnic cleansing and retaliatory violence. One of the main concerns surrounding TRIPP is that its breakthrough has come at the expense of human rights. There is, as yet, no plan for the dignified return of Armenians displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh, prompting criticism that the agreement enforces a form of "victor's justice."

Another concern lies in the highly personalistic nature of TRIPP. Its success depends on the sustained engagement of President Trump and the broader commitment of the United States. With Washington's agenda already crowded by competing priorities, it remains unclear how much political and financial capital will be invested in ensuring the deal's durability. Moreover, since commercial incentives underpin the initiative, its longevity may depend as much on profitability as on diplomacy — raising the question of whether or not the political will to sustain it will persist if economic returns prove lower than expected.

Deinstitutionalization, personalized unilateralism, and the commercialization of peacebuilding highlight the risks associated with the decline of post-Cold War multilateralism. Closely linked to this trend is the de-prioritization of democracy and human rights as essential conditions for a just and lasting settlement. In parallel, alternative multi- and mini-lateral frameworks, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, and the 3+3 platform, are gaining traction in the South Caucasus. Their appeal lies precisely in their loose, interest-driven, and non-committal nature. These groupings profess no shared values beyond non-interference in domestic affairs and respect for all forms of governance.

Both Azerbaijan and Armenia have sought to join the SCO but were blocked by India and Pakistan, respectively — at least for now. Yet, the platform's growing importance is evident: it was at an SCO meeting in Tianjin that Pakistan formally recognized Armenia. Azerbaijan and Türkiye have each expressed interest in BRICS, not for the organization's immediate utility but as a way of diversifying their strategic options. Armenia, too weak economically to be a serious BRICS contender, has nevertheless adopted a similar logic in foreign and security policy — seeking to diversify dependencies as a means of preserving the maximum autonomy possible.

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One of the most notable absences in this evolving landscape is Europe and, more specifically, the European Union. Armenia maintains close ties with France, its leading political and military partner in Europe. Paris effectively represented the EU within the OSCE Minsk Group, much to Baku's discontent. In recent years, Armenia has also deepened cooperation with Brussels, pursuing visa liberalization and closer integration. Many observers now argue that Armenia has, in effect, traded places with Georgia as the EU's closest partner in the Caucasus despite Georgia's formal candidate status.

Yet, Armenia cannot fully substitute Georgia as the main conduit of European influence in the region. Yerevan does not follow an "EU-first" foreign policy as Tbilisi once did; instead, it seeks diver-

sification and multi-alignment — or, as one analyst put it, policy that is "balanced and balancing." Azerbaijan remains interested primarily in limited trade and energy ties, leveraging Europe's need for diversification rather than aspiring to deeper integration. Türkiye, still formally an EU candidate but with increasingly strained relations with Brussels, is more focused on enhancing its own regional role than advancing that of the Union. With none of the regional actors actively seeking EU membership — and with the decline of the multilateral frameworks where Brussels once had influence — the EU's clout in the South Caucasus is visibly waning.

The transformation unfolding in the South Caucasus mirrors the broader unravelling of the post-Cold War order. Institutions that once underpinned regional stability have faded, replaced by transactional bargains that privilege access and influence over principles and process. TRIPP may well stabilize the region in the short term, but it also exposes the fragility of peace built on personality, profit, and power rather than shared institutions or rules. The absence of Europe — and of any multilateral anchor — underscores a shift from consensus to competition where leverage takes precedence over legitimacy.

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The story of the South Caucasus is, therefore, not only about the redrawing of geopolitical lines but also about the erosion of the very idea that peace should be institutional, accountable, and rooted in common norms. This would have consequences for Georgia's unresolved conflicts, which are still being dealt with, albeit unsuccessfully, within the multilateral framework of the Geneva International Discussions. TRIPP's example highlights the efficiency of unilateral deal-making but also its costs: a diminished concern for rights, transparency, and sustainability. As Russia retreats, the United States intervenes, and Europe watches from the sidelines, a new order is emerging. This order is poised to be defined less by principles than by pragmatism and less by cooperation than by the transactional logic of opportunity ■